Political Management of the Military in Latin America

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LATIN AMERICAN political leaders have had considerable success at subordinating their militaries to civilian rule, but they have done so without a fundamental knowledge of or interest in defense affairs. But, our own definitions of civilian control, which almost uniformly stipulate that civilians must be well versed on defense if they are to lead, preclude us from comprehending these positive trends. The definitions, which are normative and based largely on standards imported from North America and Western Europe, are exacting, and they erect hurdles that Latin America not only has not cleared but cannot clear.

Consequently, a great disjuncture exists between what we posit must happen to achieve civilian control and what actually happened. If we were to hypothesize that a central pillar of civilian control hinged on the ability of civilian politicians and their appointed officials to show they could lead informatively on defense, we would be left with a null set: no Latin American states would qualify because there has never been the kind of permanent security-threat environment that warrants investing the resources and talent necessary to create sophisticated war machines nor to equip civilian overseers with an understanding of how they work.

By and large, militaries of the region do not have to worry about the threat of invasion from foreign militaries, and thus, civilians do not have to worry about investing the necessary time to understanding defense, strategy, tactics, preparation, budgeting, deployment, doctrine, or training. Internal threats (narcotraffickers, terrorists, guerrillas) do not pose challenges that warrant great military preparedness and sophistication.

Unlike the U.S., Latin American military spending does not generate great amounts of civilian employment, and thus, politicians cannot benefit from diverting defense resources to their districts. Consequently, they have no incentive to learn about defense. Still, the military must be managed. What Latin America needs are civilians who can manage the military in political-, not defense-, oriented terms. In this respect, Latin America is in better shape than we might think, but we would never know that within the confines of current intellectual constructs.

The Problem

An overwhelming consensus exists within the community of Latin American scholars that civilians inside and outside defense ministries and legislative committees suffer from an appreciable deficit in knowledge of defense affairs. Such knowledge is vital if political leaders are to command the respect among military officers necessary to fully achieve civilian control. It is significant that in the one country where some case arguably could be made for civilian competence (Argentina), a leading civil-military scholar insists that, as of 2 years ago, a significant absence of civilian defense knowledge, with few resources or institutions committed to training civilians in defense, still existed.[1]

What is it that civilians do not know, and for how long have they not known it? Latin American civilians within defense ministries (and legislative commissions) seemed unprepared to lead on questions pertaining to national-defense objectives, priorities, threats, strategies, implementation, budgeting, doctrine, and education. They consistently duck questions on if and how defense forces are needed to achieve national security. What foreign and domestic policy objectives of the nation, if any, would entail the use of defense forces? Under what conditions? At what cost? And, are the militaries ready to defend? Then there is the question of prioritization of goals. What are the most critical security and defense objectives? Which ones are less critical? Assuming clear goals were laid out, how does the nation get from here to there? Civilian ministers and their staffs do not seem to be up to speed on national security and defense strategies.

Civilians within the defense community should be well versed in implementation problems, even if the

responsibility lies more with the military itself. How will the military be readied, organized, trained, and deployed to meet the challenges it faces? There are also budgetary matters. Are civilians helping to construct budgets correlated with strategic objectives? Are they allocating funds needed to fulfill missions that have been carefully conceived and assigned by civilian leaders? There is scant evidence they have.

Finally, there are questions about doctrine and education. How are militaries oriented to fight? How should their orientation change to fit national priorities? What are the military schools teaching? Are lessons consistent with democratic values? How do they relate to the overall objectives of the nation? Civilians have a hands-off policy when it comes to ideological and intellectual preparation of soldiers.

Another way of viewing the defense-knowledge deficit in Latin America is to note what kind of knowledge surplus exists within the U.S. Department of Defense. The U.S. Secretary of Defense's 2003 "Annual Report to the President and the Congress" maps out new operational goals and specifies the budgetary request to fulfill each.[2] Within the report, the section on operational risk asks four basic, essential questions Latin American civilian defense ministers and ministries seldom pose: Do we have the right forces available? Are our forces postured to succeed? Are our forces currently ready? Are our forces employed consistent with our strategic priorities?[3] The report answers each question in detail: we are still waiting for answers from Latin American Defense Ministers.

Historical Timing

Historical timing is important. Certainly, if this were the period of democratic transition, or even the early post-transitional period, it would be presumptuous to raise such concerns. But now, some 20 to 25 years after the democratic wave washed ashore, enough water has passed under the bridge to allow us to take stock of Latin America's condition. Indeed, comparisons with Spain permit such evaluation. Just 15 years after the fall of the Franquist regime, Felipe Agüero could declare that civilian supremacy had been fully attained.[4] His definition of supremacy is quite demanding, insisting that civilians have an active presence in defense spheres, including their own defense project; a set of well-thought-out views on military organization; professional norms and education, and allocation of resources. If Spain had succeeded in meeting most of its goals after 15 years of democracy, certainly it is time to ask hard questions about Latin America's lack of progress after 20 to 25 years.

Similarly, just a decade after the fall of communism, civil-military scholars of Eastern and Central Europe insisted countries there had already moved from first-generation issues of institutional restructuring to second-generation challenges of control of defense policy.[5] Why, then, has Latin America not yet met second-generation challenges?

The first, most basic question to ask is, Are civilians in charge of the defense ministries in Latin America? If not, and if they are not in a position to exert authority or to hire other civilians into key ministerial positions, it matters little whether they have defense wisdom.

Not surprisingly, the military dominated the position of defense minister during the 1980s when the region was in the infancy of its democratic rebirth. By the early 1990s, that domination eased, but if we look at the figures over the last decade, there is no trend at all toward civilianizing defense cabinet positions. In 1994, 44 percent of all ministers were from the military. In 2004, the figure was 46 percent. It is also disturbing to note the military's thorough monopolization of the defense portfolio in some of the region's largest and most important countries: Venezuela, Peru, Brazil, and Mexico. Those countries have had military defense ministers between 90 to 100 percent of the time over the last 21 years. Based on these data, Latin America is not moving steadily in the direction of civilianized defense ministries.

What about civilians currently in charge? How much defense education and on-the-job experience do they have? Data were examined to see if ministers had taken courses or obtained degrees at military or civilian academic institutions in Latin America or elsewhere and if they had previously served in the defense ministry in any capacity or had occupied any relevant defense- or security-related post elsewhere in government. Of the eight civilian defense ministers (out of 15) currently in power, only two, possibly three, have *some* defense-relevant education, and only one has a defense career background. Thus, only 13 percent of *all* defense ministers are civilians with some defense expertise, and only 7 percent are civilian defense ministers with a defense background.

Naturally, these findings do not begin to get at the problem of the poorly trained civilian staff that mans subordinate posts within these ministries. The findings also do not touch on the subject of legislative defense commissions and whether congressmen, or staff assigned to them, have fundamental defense understandings. Unfortunately, I could not obtain information on those variables. But, if civilians are to lead on defense, leadership must begin at the top. Few civilian defense ministers in the region, let alone the presidents they answer to, can exert authority over the military based on expertise, irrespective of

Colombian Finance Minister Roberto Junguito (*center*) and President Alvaro Uribe meeting with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Department of Defense

whether they are in the formal chain of command or not (and most are).

Why should this dearth in defense knowledge matter? That the knowledge gap will be closed any time soon is not likely. Powerful historical, structural, and self-interest reasons exist as to why this is so. Latin America is not a region where politicians have ever had or will ever have the incentive to get up to speed on defense issues. However, that is not to say civilians cannot be effective handlers of armed forces. Presidents and their defense ministers have had (with a few obvious exceptions) relative success at subduing military rebellions, calming civil-military tensions, and building stable, generally respectful relations predicated on military subordination to civilian control. The balance of political power has unquestionably tilted in favor of civilians over the course of 15 to 20 years, but the *balance of competence has not.* Civilians still are at a decided disadvantage vis-à-vis their military counterparts when it comes to understanding the ins and outs of defense.

Yet, nearly every definition of civilian control assumes managing the military is part of managing defense—that they are inseparable. While Latin American politicians have every incentive to manage the military in a way that subordinates them to civilian authority, they have few incentives to develop expertise on defense issues. In suggesting, however, that the former cannot be accomplished without the latter, as almost all definitions do, we are left to contemplate the absurd proposition that according to our own criteria, there is little if any civilian control anywhere in Latin America.

If civil-military relations in the region are in such a precarious state, then given the importance of civilian control to the survival and consolidation of democracy, it follows that democratic governments are also in a precarious state. Neither is the case. The reasonable alternative is to adjust the definitions so they are relevant and in tune with Latin American realities. And, they must be adjusted primarily by separating civilian control of the military from civilian control of defense.

Civilian Control and Defense Wisdom

That it is hard to guide the military without knowing something about defense has long been argued. Obedience implies command, so the argument goes. Soldiers can only be expected to faithfully comply with orders if they have confidence their political overseers can lead on the issues that matter most to them. Absent that leadership, soldiers can lose respect for civilian handlers, the chain of command can weaken, and military insubordination can result.[6]

Of course command authority can imply many things, but the literature on civil-military relations leaves little doubt command is strongly tied to defense wisdom, in which civilians (at least in Latin America) are lacking. The requisites of knowledge begin with Samuel Huntington, the author of *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics*


A Uruguayan soldier takes notes during a briefing.

US Army

of Civil-Military Relations.[7] Even within the notion of objective control, which relies heavily on the military's professionalization, a strong need exists for civilian competence in defense affairs. The Secretary of Defense must be able to integrate fiscal and defense information into an overall policy design. To do this, he would have to rely on a military *and* civilian staff to help develop a comprehensive military program.[8]

The National Security Council (NSC), composed mainly of civilians, is charged with advising on overall national security policy.[9] Huntington found it inconceivable for such an agency to function if its civilian members were in the dark about defense. The failure of Latin American NSC members to become sufficiently informed about defense might be one reason presidents from the region so seldom convene their NSCs.

More recent scholarship has essentially heeded Huntington's call. According to Agüero, civilian control involves the ability of civilians to define goals and the organization of defense, formulate conduct of defense policy, and monitor implementation of policy to avert military perceptions of civilian incompetence and to overcome military corporate resistance to democratic leadership.[10] In commenting on the requisites for democratic civilian control, J. Samuel Fitch notes that civilians must be able to identify threats that would warrant military force; assign the military its defense- or security-related missions; devise a sensible budget; set defense policy; and exert oversight on military education and socialization. Absent these elements, military subordination to civilian rule could become conditional—no longer absolute.[11]

According to Harold Trinkunas, in "Crafting Civilian Control in Argentina and Venezuela," the key is for civilians to attempt to institutionalize their control via oversight of military activities and military professionalism.[12] To accomplish this they would need to demonstrate substantial commitments of government resources and expertise. Trinkunas acknowledges there are lesser cost-control methods that hinge on strategies of appeasement and divide and rule, as well as those that rely much less on expertise and oversight. He warns, however, that these are risky and result, at best, in weakly institutionalized control.

In commenting on the need for defense reform, I argue that the "broad strokes of institutional reorganization must be painted by the president and his defense staff," but this was not done in the case of Argentina. I also blame the armed forces because they have "grasped tenaciously to defense planning as if it were a subject only they could touch."[13] With defense perceived to be off limits, civilians have never been able to prove their worth. Instead, they have developed a kind of inferiority complex that just reinforces their dependency on the military.

Rut Diamint focuses on the issue of educating civilians in defense, noting there is an unwillingness of states to invest resources into creating institutional training grounds for civilians in those areas, as there is for the diplomatic corps or for economics.[14] Juan Rial points out that civilian graduates of various institutes of higher studies in Latin America rarely head for the ministries of defense.[15] Those who do are almost always uniformed personnel. Thus, there is no real career path laid out for aspiring defense administrators and managers. The results are predictable. Diamint has combed Latin America's defense ministries for clues of civilian defense wisdom. In every case she has come up short.

Why have questions of defense—in Diamint's words—"always been the private concerns of the armed forces and just a handful of civilians associated with them?"[16] Why have civilians not "taken back defense" from the military? Why, after more than two decades of democratic rule, have so few resources been devoted to equipping civilians with the skills they need to conduct defense affairs within the ministries and legislative committees? And why has our criteria for civilian control been so seemingly out of sync with Latin American realities? The fact is, civilians have not *and will not* become sufficiently well versed on defense matters anytime

soon. They will always have a significant knowledge deficit because there is no incentive for them to learn defense. For several important reasons, defense has not been and will not be a priority for Latin American governments.

Historical Legacies and War Avoidance

Latin American armies were neither created for nor called on to serve in ways commensurate with West European armies during the formative stages of state creation. With few exceptions, Latin American armies were never state builders. They never used offensive power to enlarge national territories at the expense of others. They were mainly involved in internal, internecine conflicts between caudillos—political party bosses and other power brokers—all within boundaries set by Spain and Portugal. Consequently, they did not have to grow to a size or achieve a readiness consonant with the huge tasks of state formation and, hence, did not inherit the critical legacies European armies inherited.

Strip away the myths armies have built about their indispensable roles in defense of "la Patria" and you will find these institutions, with one or two exceptions, never succeeded at expanding the reach of states, or even consolidating the territories they had.[17] But, if they have seldom used offensive capabilities to project power and seize territory, neither have they readied themselves for defensive purposes. Latin American nations have fought few interstate wars. The region has been and remains one of the most pacific on earth, and militaries have never had to be effective deterrents to invasion.

In the absence of war or the threat of war, there has been less demand for strong fighting machines as well as less demand for defense expertise among civilians. In his exhaustive study of wars and nation-states in Latin America, Miguel Centeno finds that civilian elites, military officers, the masses, and the media alike largely reject interstate war as a feasible option to addressing political problems.[18]

Politicians seldom voice the rhetoric of war and usually have more to fear from internal mass movements than from invasion by foreign countries. National leaders do not see a rational gain in war and do not include war as part of their behavioral repertoire. Society routinely rejects war or war preparation as an option. Two-thirds of those polled in 1998 opposed U.S. weapons sales to Latin America for fear doing so would generate an arms race.[19] Centeno says, "Latin American states and their populations do not appear to have had the historically forged institutional or political appetite for the type of organizational insanity of modern war."[20]

Latin America is gun-shy of war, and it shows. In the last 100 years, only six wars have been fought and there have been only three since 1935.[21] Latin America lags behind Europe, Asia, and the Middle East in terms of the number of wars fought during the 20th century. Only Africa had fewer. Border skirmishes have been plentiful, but according to Centeno, only 5 percent of these erupted into full-scale war, compared to 65 percent in Europe. David Mares refers to militarized interstate disputes (MID), where military violence is threatened, displayed, or used without producing wars, as being plentiful in Latin American history, numbering in the hundreds.[22] Yet, of 237 MIDs in South and Central America over the course of a century, a mere 2.5 percent developed into full-scale combat.

The percentages reflect both an unwillingness and inability to wage external wars.[23] Latin American militaries are not trained or equipped to fight sustained international battles. Thus, when they do engage the enemy, they look for quick exits rather than decisive victories.

In January 1995, sensing that a conflict was imminent between his country and Peru, Ecuadorian President Duran-Ballen Cordovez requested the attention of the guarantor states 3 days before hostilities began. Three weeks later, the guarantor states had secured a cease fire, and 11 days later, the brief war ended with the Declaration of Montevideo. Monica Herz and João Pontes Nogueira comment: "Fear of general escalation certainly contributed to limiting the scale of violence and to attempts to end the war quickly."[24]

Yes, there have been many protracted internal wars fought between armies and guerrillas and civil wars between political factions and their militias, but the resource and organizational and logistical demands of such conflicts cannot compete with those required for interstate conflicts. With the exception of the Sendero Luminoso in Peru and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), most guerrilla units in South America have been defeated with relative ease, never testing the armed forces' warfare capabilities. In Peru, dogged police-intelligence work, not decisive battlefield victories by the armed forces, finally vanquished the Sendero.

Centeno argues that Latin American militaries sought internal missions because they could handle them. In constructing its defensive Cold War architecture, the United States knew it would never rely on Latin American forces to contribute to the Hemisphere's defense, because it justifiably believed Latin American militaries were unable to lend a hand in fighting major international wars. Thus, the United States relegated Latin American states to internal policing and oriented its military aid and sales programs toward inducing an inward look.

An Argentine soldier stands guard at a 2001 peacekeeping exercise in Salta, Argentina.

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Avoiding War

When Latin American countries occasionally do engage in war, their capacities, not to mention their will to fight, are quickly depleted, as evidenced by Argentina's defeat by Great Britain in the Malvinas War in 1982 and by the brevity of the Peru-Ecuador conflict of 1995. The lessons learned from these brief, unsuccessful encounters are quite distinct from those learned in the Northern Hemisphere where civilian and defense experts endlessly review past performances, looking at how tactics, strategies, equipment, and men combined to either win or lose to better prepare for the next war.

In the South, governments and militaries usually devise means of avoiding the next war. Argentina quickly discovered how thoroughly ill-prepared it was for an armed engagement against a first-rate world power. The lesson learned was not to develop a larger, more sophisticated fighting machine but to, in a phrase, "downsize with diplomacy."

Argentina's military has been reduced to a shell of what it once was. There are fewer men under arms, fewer installations, less weaponry, and less training time. Meanwhile, diplomatic efforts have solved countless disputes with Britain and with Argentina's neighbors—Brazil and Chile. Diplomacy has so reduced tensions between these states as to make armed conflict between them practically unthinkable, which in turn, made it unnecessary to equip the military in ways that would allow it to effectively fight an interstate war and lowered the need for civilians to preoccupy themselves with defense preparedness.[25]

Argentina is not alone in desiring to avoid prioritizing military war preparedness. As a region, Latin America spends less on the military than any other region on earth. Latin America's average military expenditures as a percent of the gross domestic product trails behind Western Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. Its military expenditure as a percent of central government expenditures is significantly less than any other regions. Few politicians devote the time, resources, and political capital necessary to build their armed forces into effective fighting units.

What politicians and armies have been doing with great relish is to forge cooperative security agreements that make the need or risk of armed engagement between neighbors more remote. It might seem like defense business as usual when we note the countless efforts on the part of Southern Cone states to forge regional security cooperation. An impressive array of defense-related activities, ranging from mutual visitations to joint training and simulations, has occurred. But the principal motive behind these efforts is *not* to construct better defenses against an unknown or undefined enemy, but to increase trust and transparency between them to avoid the temptation to go to

war and the need to worry about defense.[26] And, this means civilian overseers can devote less attention to defense preparedness.

The more-relaxed security environment throughout most of South and Central America reduces the need to maintain force posture and readiness, let alone the need to build larger, stronger, more sophisticated militaries, especially in the context of huge economic and social problems, with cash-strapped governments struggling to cope with so many other pressing priorities. While there is no permanent security threat environment that warrants the investment of the resources, time, and talent necessary to create sophisticated militaries, there is a near-permanent economic and social threat environment, which includes the threats of widening poverty, unemployment, declining social welfare services, and so on, that begs for governmental attention. Defense can never compete for this kind of attention, and the truth is it never has.

Disincentives to Learn Defense

Defense is a public good, and it is rarely consumed. Not a week goes by when the average Latin American citizen does not rely on power, transportation, communication, sewage, and school systems, and medical facilities, many needed on a routine basis. But defense lies in waiting; it is almost never used, and it is seldom visible. If it is in a state of disrepair, as roads, phones, electrical grids, and trains invariably are, citizens do not mind. Defense does not directly affect their lives. Thus, it is difficult for politicians to promote defense spending as a political issue.

Were military-related threats to national security more common, visible, and imminent, and were the need to deploy military force more apparent, it would be less difficult. But this is not the case. To be sure, there are various threats to security (narcotrafficking, terrorism, contraband, other criminal activity, and illegal migration), but they do not compel wholesale military responses. In this not-so-new security environment, police, internal security forces, immigration authorities, and intelligence units are at the front line. Militaries occupy rearguard positions, waiting for the occasional call to assist other forces. Even when they do engage, they do so in a limited way, whether for logistical support, aerial surveillance, or conducting anti-crime sweeps through a drug-ridden barrio. These are not the kind of missions that test the military's mettle.

Of course, even in the absence of threat, defense could still be relevant were it to provide important private goods to its citizens. In the United States that good is employment. Millions of North Americans—often entire communities—depend on defense expenditures for their livelihoods. Military bases and munitions plants, which employ civilians, are spread throughout the nation and motivate legislators to care and know about defense, procurement, and the defense budget and its enlargement. Key congressmen and their highly trained staffs sit on the Armed Services Committees where they wield considerable clout.

By contrast, in Latin America, military installations and defense contractors provide few civilian jobs and are normally concentrated in select areas. Defense is not a huge pork-barrel opportunity.[27] Thus, only a few lawmakers gain by diverting expenditures to defense. If there is little to gain in terms of extending patronage and resources to their districts, legislators, as members of their respective parties, might still have an incentive to deliberate on defense policy. But, political parties in Latin America rarely include defense issues in their platform statements, and they do not make defense an issue either in the campaigns or thereafter.[28]

Within Latin American congresses, defense commissions (where they exist) are poorly equipped to wield authority and oversight. Only 10 Latin American countries have committees dedicated solely to defense. The others have committees with overlapping jurisdictions. In Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Paraguay, defense shares the agenda with foreign affairs, public order, development, or general governmental operations, which means focused attention to defense and the military is attenuated.[29] Congressional members of these commissions seldom stay long and thus do not gain the necessary experience and expertise. The scope of military- and defense-related tasks assumed by these defense commissions is restricted.

A review of defense committee work for 13 countries in recent years shows they most often deal with granting permission for deployment of national troops abroad; for the entrance of foreign troops into national territory; promotion and retirement rules; pensions and social security benefits for officers and families; judicial matters, including military court jurisdictions; and decorative or symbolic acts, including conferring medals, honors, and so on.[30] These functions correspond closely to what the national constitutions stipulate for the legislative branch in general. In other words, defense commissions have not carved out their own unique, more-detailed defense agendas.

Reflecting on what these commissions are *not* doing on a regular basis is instructive. They are not reviewing the defense portion of the budgets, and

for good reason: they have no access to them. Congressmen are not privy to the itemized details of the defense ledger.

In most Latin American societies, national security trumps the congressional right to review and analyze, let alone change, defense allocations. Neither the defense nor budget and finance commissions are empowered to reopen, examine, or rewrite the packaged defense budget. There is no item-by-item review, no markup, and thus, no real capacity to assign or reassign resources to defense accounts, which impairs the committee's ability to carry out another vital function: oversight.

Defense commissions are not exerting informed oversight on defense operations, other than to decide troop exits and entrances. They occasionally weigh in on defense production and procurement and military judicial matters. Without the necessary expenditure information, congress cannot take the military to task for misallocations, wasteful spending, or fraud. The commissions have no auditors to examine military accounts. At best, commissions can call the defense minister to testify. If there is any effort, however limited, to exert budgetary oversight, it appears to be controlled by the services themselves.

Aside from information, another central issue is expertise, which is also needed for oversight. Unlike the fields of medicine, education, or health, few Latin American countries have communities of experts who can inform the debate or help staff commissions. The venue for defense-related discussions is the military academy, not a think tank or civilian university. And, there are few ongoing institutionalized channels of communication or revolving doors to link committees with an external defense establishment to help make more informed decisions.[31]

In sum, the public pays no heed to defense unless there is a clear external threat that warrants an organized, military response. Because such threats rarely materialize in Central and South America, legislative politicians cannot prioritize defense because doing so would serve no electoral purpose. Defense, as opposed to the dozens of other more pressing issues, will not deliver tangible benefits.

Political parties do not fashion major defense positions in their platforms for the same reasons, and those in the executive branch of government do not give precedence to defense. All of this leads to the predictable result that civilians in and out of government do not have the necessary expertise to lead on defense. Yet, civilians must exert political authority over the military and pay attention to civil-military affairs. How can they do so without a firm grip on defense? The fact is they have been doing so for many years.

Civilian Control

That civilian control in Latin America, by any reasonable measure, hinges on civilians gaining defense proficiency is unlikely. During the past two decades, while the *balance of competence* still tilts heavily in favor of the military, the *balance of power* has moved in favor of civilians. With some exceptions, civilians have gained the upper hand over the military despite considerable gaps in defense-related knowledge—gaps which have not closed appreciably. The balance of power has moved decisively in favor of democratic governments in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

To a lesser extent, but still visible, is a movement in favor of civilians in Chile and Guatemala. Even in Colombia, where a brutal civil war continues to rage, there is no talk of the civilian government losing control over its armed forces. Only in Ecuador, Paraguay, and Venezuela have efforts to appreciably reduce military political power fallen short. Generally speaking, armies have less political influence in Latin American democratic systems than they once had. Coup avoidance is practiced regularly but so, too, is the threat of a coup or other provocative warnings that militaries typically issued to civilian overseers in the past. In a legal and practical sense, most militaries remain subordinate to civilian authorities. Presidents have legal command over their forces, and militaries honor that command.

Some of the successes throughout Latin America during the course of two decades include—

- Creating or re-creating defense ministries, most of which are in the chain of command.
- Significant military downsizing, in terms of size and budgets.
- Losing military prerogatives, including shrinking military court jurisdictions; loss of cabinet and other positions of vertical governmental authority; and loss of control over police and other internal security forces.
- Losing the military's clandestine civilian supporters (especially within right-wing and business circles) and, thus, its praetorian leverage outside the state.
- Greater civilian autonomy over the making of national policies and, concomitantly, fielding virtually no military interference (with the exception of Venezuela).
- Military noninterference in selecting and electing civilians to political posts (with Ecuador and Venezuela the exceptions).
- Presidentially authorized, wholesale purges of top commanders (in Argentina, Guatemala, and Honduras) and military acquiescence to those moves.
- Military missions (internal or external) under-

taken at the behest of civilian authorities, not autonomously.

Despite these improvements, the region seems light years away from institutionalized democratic civilian control, if that means extensive civilian understandings and supervision of defense affairs within well-oiled defense institutions. The disjuncture between these expectations and the reality on the ground is sizeable. Take Central America for example. Central America is emblematic of so much of what has occurred in Latin America. Mark Ruhl accurately portrays the situation, noting how, contrary to every expectation, "democratically chosen leaders in [Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua] have largely subordinated the military to civilian control and curbed its political influence."[32]

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U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Chilean Defense Minister Mario Fernandez.

Evidence of this trend is clear. The militaries have accepted "major reductions in their budgets and structures"; lost control of police forces; watched as their courts have lost jurisdiction over human rights cases; accepted, despite their displeasure, abrupt and sweeping personnel changes; and, in general, been obedient to executive orders and thus refrained from interference in governmental policymaking.[33]

Military Control

The militaries operate within the bounds of the law, and the laws have been strengthened to clarify the prerogatives of the president and his defense ministries. Still, in every case, the militaries enjoy autonomy over institutional and defense matters civilians will not touch. Whether in a country like El Salvador, which arguably has made the greatest strides toward civilian control, or Guatemala, which has lagged behind, the pattern is the same: when it comes to defense planning, operations, budgeting, training, doctrine, or education, civilians are nowhere to be found.

El Salvador, where the military was once so dominant, "now accepts civilian control."[34] Yet, the defense ministry is totally overrun by military personnel from top to bottom. The armed forces completely control all facets of defense planning, budgeting, operations, and intelligence gathering. And, legislative defense commissions, lacking all expertise and interest in defense, fail to monitor the military's use of resources. As soon as Salvadoran and other Central American presidents successfully reestablished civil-military order, they lost interest in further talk of military reforms presided over by themselves or their defense ministers.

In short, in Central America, there is a complete absence of civilian defense-related insight, influence, and expertise, yet military subordination to civilian rule has been largely achieved. That no discernible trend toward greater civilian expertise in defense affairs exists is important to note. Not even a hint is present that they have any interest in the subject. The result, at least for El Salvador (and Honduras), is greater institutional autonomy for the military within a framework Ruhl characterizes as being "close to democratic civilian control."[35]

So what is the rub? The common reaction to these trends is, yes, Central American governments, like most Latin American governments, have achieved a semblance of civilian control. But, to complete and institutionalize the task, they *must* clear the hurdle of defense wisdom, and they *must* fortify their ministries and legislative commissions by staffing them with knowledgeable civilian defense specialists. This is where one must part ways with conventional wisdom and say, What we see is about as good as it is going to get. We should dispense with the "musts" and the "oughts" and spend more time trying to construct definitions and analyses that conform to Latin American, not North American or European, realities.

The requirements for civilian control, in a security environment where the threat of war is remote; demands for great military prowess is low; and the material payoff to society of defense buildups is meager, should be different than requirements where the threats, demands, and payoffs are great. That

is, civilian governments need ministers who can manage military affairs—not defense affairs. They need specialists who can interface with the military on political and personal levels rather than technical ones. There is less need to invest appreciably in defense experts when critical issues have less to do with war preparation or defense readiness and more to do with the military as a self-interested, corporate institution. Civilian management of military affairs must be separated from civilian management of defense affairs. Once having done so, we can construct a less exacting but empirically more realistic definition of civilian control.

Political Civilian Control

Although civilians are reluctant to deal with defense issues, they must still manage the military. The armed forces form the coercive arm of the state as well as a self-interested corporation with needs that must be addressed. Civilian leaders have managed the military, largely through a form of political civilian control, which is a low-cost means of achieving a relative calm in civil-military affairs without investing in extensive institution building, expertise, legislative oversight, and large budgets. This has been the modus operandi for the majority of presidents and defense ministers in Latin America for some time.

Political civilian control is to be distinguished from classical notions of civilian control whether or not they are objective, subjective (penetration model), democratic, or more recent reinventions of these terms. The concept has several dimensions. For example, it is a means of avoiding undesirable military behavior, be it intense pressure, provocation, coup threats, or actual coups. Certainly coup avoidance on its own does not solidify a hierarchical relation between civilian leaders and their militaries, but in a region marked historically by coups, it is an important accomplishment in itself.

Also, political civilian control is personal. Unlike Huntington's notion of subjective civilian control, civilian control does not mean the bulk of the military is socialized to a civilian or political party point of view. Unlike penetration models practiced in communist states, the civilian control model presumes no effort to indoctrinate officers and the rank and file to a political philosophy, nor does it presume soldiers will have fully absorbed and internalized the principal of democratic civilian control. Rather, the concept suggests a more modest effort to ensure conformity with policy, first and foremost, at higher echelons of the service. Selected key officers are predisposed to fall in line with the preferences of politicians in power. They are officials who best can sell political positions to subordinates or soothe qualms about those positions. Presidents promote officers with whom they are familiar, have known via political party or familial connections, or who they surmise will be loyal to them. At the least, they try to purge from the top ranks those they calculate might cause them trouble. In doing so, they might have to upset rules of seniority to find officers who demonstrate maximum compliance, forcing those above to retire.

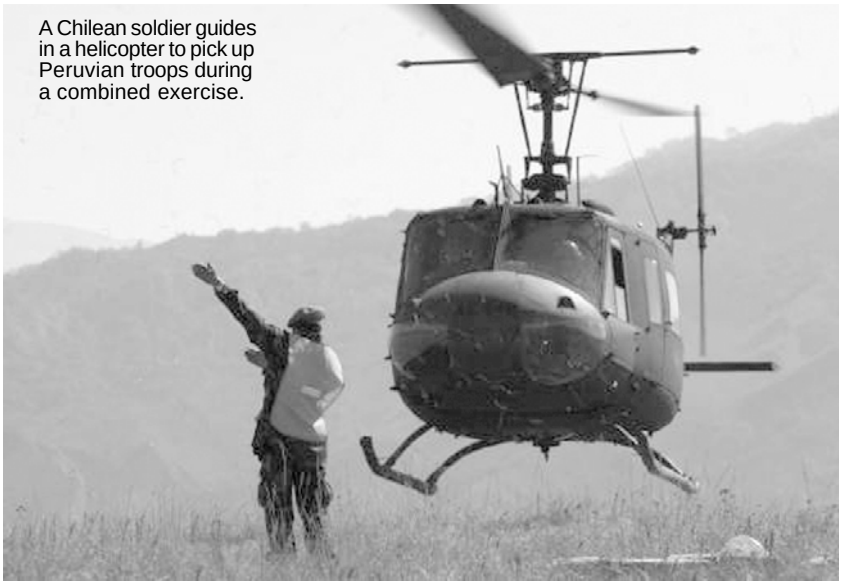
Even in Argentina, the country presumed to be closer to institutionalized civilian control than any other, the personal dimension remains critical. Soon after assuming office, President Nestor Kirchner dramatically cashiered nearly half the military's high command—officers Kirchner surmised had been too close to President Carlos Menem, had disreputable human-rights records, or who might have interfered with human-rights inquiries. First to go was General Ricardo Brinzoni, who had voiced political views at odds with official policy. Kirchner reached down 20 places on the army's seniority list and chose General Roberto Bendini, someone he knew and trusted, to replace Brinzoni.[36] The new retirees walked away without a fight.

Presidents appoint ministers adept at managing the military and who usually come to the job without defense experience or education. They are not knowledgeable about defense, but they are politically adroit. They know how to keep the military off the front pages of newspapers, smooth over rough edges, put out brush fires, calm jittery nerves, make pledges of support, reinterpret political messages in a positive light, and so on. This does not imply acquiescence to military preferences; rather, it implies a willingness to convey those preferences up the chain of command.

Skilled civilian managers of the military are those who are willing to represent military interests to the administration while conveying administration preferences and commands to the military in a diplomatic yet firm manner, which is especially important when the government's policy priorities diverge from the military's. Governments must be able to make decisions that are unpopular with the military, yet retain the military's compliance. But governments are unlikely to gain the military's cooperation by proving their defense credentials; rather they do so by reminding the military that they and their administration are the ones who make policy; it is the military's firm constitutional obligation to fulfill policy in a subordinate manner. Thus, civilian authority and the military's respect for that authority do not stem from civilian defense knowledge.

Presidents and their civilian defense ministers try to avert, hold the line against, or channel and routinize military protestations, ultimately prevailing in those

difficult circumstances. Failure to do so simply invites future protestations and runs the risk of weakening the government's sphere of influence, which is not to say the military never registers its displeasure. When it does, it does so privately, within official channels.


A Chilean soldier guides in a helicopter to pick up Peruvian troops during a combined exercise.

US Army

The military avoids taking public issue with civilians and refrains from overt provocations and threats, observing the rules of the civil-military game. By honoring procedures, the military helps solidify political civilian control, but it does not forsake its right to exert influence, which might take the form of advice and advocacy.

In the realm of spheres of influence, political civilian control adheres to the maxim "live and let live." Civilian leaders do not meddle in core military interests if the military observes similar rules about the government's core interests. The military's core pertains to administering its services but, more important, to planning, preparing, and programming defense, which separates the Latin American model from the North American one, where the secretary of defense and his largely civilian staff are in charge of defense policy and strategy.

In Latin America, questions concerning defense strategy and tactics as they relate to force training, structure, and deployment have been left completely to the military to decide. Meanwhile, the armed forces observe limits to their own influence, leaving civilians to make policies outside the realm of defense. The military also does not have a say about the choice of political leaders and cabinet appointees.

If this sounds like objective civilian control, well, not quite. Huntington certainly maintains there must be a strict division of labor between things military and things civilian, but he also argues that the military's subordination hinges on its professionalism. This is not the case here. Levels of professionalism might vary considerably among forces that plainly adhere to political civilian control. Moreover, objective civilian control presumes, as a consequence of greater professionalism, the military will become apolitical. The heart of political civilian control *is* politics; the military and its civilian overseers are political actors.

The military is the coercive arm of the state and a politically minded corporate interest group seeking benefit for itself. Its civilian overseers are political because they influence military behavior in ways conducive to subordination and by getting the military to ascribe to behaviors they might otherwise not prefer. Simply occupying formal positions of authority is not enough; they must interface with military commanders on a weekly or daily basis, striking a balance between firmness and flexibility, but they must do so inside the corridors of power. Hence, civil-military relations are not political as in a polemical discharge of opposing views into the stream of public opinion. After all, it is vital for subordinate military actors to keep political opinions to themselves.

While civilians interface, they do not intervene. The government stays out of the military's defense sphere of influence principally because of its lack of knowledge and staff. In virtually all Latin American governments, legislatures, and defense ministries, there exists an overwhelming sense that the armed forces have a near-monopoly on defense wisdom and that civilians' own defense-knowledge deficit can never be adequately overcome. This deficit differentiates the Latin American situation from that of North America, where civilian defense secretaries, especially their staff members, are well versed in defense-related issues and routinely delve into military affairs.

According to recent scholarship, civilian "meddling" has not only been a historically common occurrence in developed countries, it has been useful—even essential—to the proper management of

defense and the conduct of war.[37] Civilian immersion in the details of defense planning (intermingling with soldiers at every level and carefully monitoring their actions for evidence of shirking responsibilities) has, according to North American experts, improved defense functioning overall, but civilian meddling in core Latin American military affairs has usually proven counterproductive. Without first establishing their defense credentials and credibility, civilians who have intervened in this way have bred military antipathy rather than compliance.

White Books and Whitewash

Civilian control of the military, in the absence of defense wisdom, is certainly not an idyllic formula. In an ideal world, it would be vastly preferable to have executive and congressional officials who could inform and oversee military defense planning and strategizing, but Latin America is not an ideal world, and these improvements have not and will not come to pass any time soon. The region's historical, contextual, and political landscape precludes such developments. Regions removed from international geopolitical flashpoints (such as the Middle East, Near East, North Asia, and South Asia) pose no threat to nations outside themselves; face virtually no risk of war within their areas; have actively avoided war and built cooperative relations via diplomatic means; cannot provide appreciable material benefits to society via military spending; and are not regions that have or will prioritize defense.

Why civilians see little payoff to earning credentials in defense-related affairs is easy to understand. Even when countries profess interest in defense, their interest is remarkably shallow, as can be seen in the defense White Books of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Guatemala that have been published over the last decade or so.[38] These are exercises in what I call "transparent obfuscation." Their purposes are ostensibly to make defense objectives, capabilities, and strategies of each nation visible to others in the region and beyond. But these amount to long treatises replete with generalizations that say little about any given state's defense realities. The analogy would be a once boarded-up house now being refurbished with a newly installed window. When we peer in, we see a poorly lit room sparsely furnished. There is little there and what is there is of little interest.

The White Books advertise they are the product of wide consultation with an assortment of civilian and military groups. That they have brought many to the defense table is to their credit. They are not by any stretch purely military documents, although it is impossible to tell who has informed which components of the reports. Still, the documents' superficiality is revealing, indicating just how little defense expertise there is. With all the consultation, collaboration, and discussion, the majority of the White Books still amount to little more than superficial reflections and sterile generalizations. Virtually nothing can be gleaned of the actual state of defense affairs in these countries. In fact, one can easily transpose from one country's White Book to another and not fundamentally alter the intended meaning.

But the White Books reveal exactly what we might expect from nations in a region that does not prioritize defense. Thus, remarkably little is said about war or defense preparation, strategy, or scenarios. Some of the subjects we might have liked the White Books to address are national objectives, threats, and strategy.

National objectives. National objectives are tied to the use of military force. What foreign and domestic policy objectives of the nation would entail use of defense forces? Under what conditions?

Threat. What are the principal military-related threats facing the nation? How probable is it these threats will materialize in the short, medium, or long term?

Strategy. Once having identified threats and points of vulnerability, what are the specific strategies the nation has pursued or would pursue in response? How do military and other security forces figure in those strategies, or would they?

- Strategic priorities. What are strategic priorities, and how would defense relate to these? What is the overall defense strategy of the nation?
- Organization, deployment, and readiness. If organization, deployment, and readiness are to be used, how are the nation's defense forces organized, equipped, and deployed to respond to specific threats? If they are not configured to be threat sensitive, then on what criteria are they configured?
- Training. How is training oriented toward equipping the military to confront a given threat? If there are deficiencies, what needs to change?
- Doctrine. What is the assessment of how the military is oriented to fight? How should this change to fit national priorities?
- Education. What are military schools teaching? How does this relate to the nation's strategic priorities?[39]

The White Book whitewash is symptomatic of an

ongoing problem; it is incumbent on scholars to catch up to that reality. Our definitions and analyses should be less normative and more analytical. Civilian control definitions, which impose unfair standards on a region not able to meet them, should be stripped of their most exacting requirements. If not, we have created a hypothesis with a null set: no state in the region can qualify to help us test the proposition—if there are these conditions (x), then there is civilian control (y).

We must come to grips with what Latin America has achieved as well as the limits to those achievements. To suggest countries of the region are at a significant deficit and, therefore, at risk because they do not have governments that can lead on defense begs essential questions. Why, with one or two exceptions, have democratic governments not succumbed to military intervention after two decades or more of democracy without defense leadership? Why are civil-military relations almost universally recognized to be more stable and suitable to civilian control than they were in the past? Why do reputable scholars of specific countries insist military subordination has been achieved even as they admit in nearly the same breath that civilians have no clue how to analyze or oversee defense strategizing, planning, budgeting, or deployment?

Yes, international forces are at work (economic and diplomatic sanctions for military coups or other democratic interruptions, for example) that make the task of subordinating the military easier than in the past, but we should not discount the political skills of presidents and their defense ministers to manage military affairs. As long as the armed forces are adroitly managed politically, civilian control can survive without defense. ***MR***

NOTES

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2. Donald H. Rumsfeld, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 2003).
3. Diamint, *Democracia,* 41.
4. Felipe Agüero, *Soldiers, Civilians and Democracy: Post-Franco Spain in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 215.
5. Andrew Cottey, Timothy Edmunds, and Anthony Foster, "The Second Generation Problematic: Rethinking Democracy and Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* (Fall 2002): 31-56.
6. Ernesto López, "Latin America: Objective and Subjective Control Revisited," *Civil-Military Relations in Latin America: New Analytical Perspectives,* ed. David S. Pion-Berlin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 98.
7. Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).
8. Ibid., 441, 450.
9. Ibid., 434.
10. Agüero, 19-20, 33.
11. J. Samuel Fitch, *The Armed Forces and Democracy in Latin America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 37-38, 40.
12. Harold Trinkunas, "Crafting Civilian Control in Argentina and Venezuela," *Civil-Military Relations in Latin America: New Analytical Perspectives,* ed. David S. Pion-Berlin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 170-71.
13. David S. Pion-Berlin, *Through Corridors of Power: Institutions and Civil-Military Relations in Argentina* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 142, 176.
14. Diamint, *Democracia,* 58.
15. Juan Rial, "La Gestión Civil en el Sector Defensa en America Latina" [Civil administration in the defense sector in Latin America], paper presented at the 6th Conference on Research and Education in Security and Defense (REDES), Santiago, Chile, October 2003.
16. Diamint, *Democracia,* 184.
17. Brian Loveman, *For la Patria: Politics and the Armed Forces in Latin America* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1999).
18. Miguel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 77.
19. Ibid., 85.
20. Ibid., 100.
21. David Mares, *Violent Peace: Militarized Interstate Bargaining in Latin America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 33.
22. Ibid., 42-43.
23. Centeno, 46-47.
24. Monica Herz and João Pontes Nogueira, *Ecuador vs. Peru: Peacemaking amid Rivalry* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 46.
25. Pion-Berlin, "Will Soldiers Follow? Economic Integration and Regional Security in the Southern Cone," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* (Spring 2000): 43-69; Pion-Berlin, ed., *Civil-Military Relations in Latin America.*
26. Jorge I. Dominguez, ed., "Security, Peace, and Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean: Challenges for the Post-Cold War Era," *International Security and Democracy: Latin America and the Caribbean in the Post-Cold War Era* (PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 1998), 3-28.
27. Wendy Hunter, *Eroding Military Influence in Brazil: Politicians against Soldiers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
28. Diamint, *Democracia.*
29. Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina (RESDAL) [Security and Defense Network of Latin America], "Parlamento y Defensa, Comisiones Parlamentarias en América Latina Abocadas en la Defensa Nacional" [Paliament and Defense, Parliament Commissions in Latin America Dedicated to the National Defense], online at <www.resdal.org.ar/main-parlamento-defensa.html>, accessed 10 September 2005.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ruhl, "Curbing Central America's Militaries," *Journal of Democracy* (July 2004): 137.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 142.
35. Ibid., 149.
36. "Quiet Exit of Argentine Top Brass Says Much," *Los Angeles Times,* 14 June 2003, A3.
37. Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: The Free Press, 2002); Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Cohen.
38. I have reviewed all of these White Books, cover to cover. My analysis is based on that review. See the following White Books:
- *Argentina: White Paper on National Defense* (1998), <www.ser2000.org.ar/protect/libro-argentino-eng/arg.htm>.
- *Chile: Libro de Defensa Nacional de Chile* [National Defense Book of Chile] (1996), in RESDAL, <www.resdal.org/Archivo/defc.htm>.
- *Colombia: Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática*, in RESDAL, <www.resdal.org/Archivo/col-03.htm>.
- *Ecuador: Libro blanco de defensa nacional* [National Defense White Book], in RESDAL, <www.resdal.org/Archivo/ecu-libro-htm>.
- *Libro de la defensa nacional de la República de Guatemala* [National Defense Book of the Republic of Guatemala], in RESDAL, <www.resdal.org/Archivo/guate-libdef03-html>.
- *Perú—propuesta de libro blanco de la defensa nacional* [National Defense Policy White Book], in RESDAL, <www.resdal. org/lb-peru-04.htm>.

39. By way of comparison, Canada's 1994 White Book goes into considerable detail about the purpose, design, deployment, and operational conduct of its missions. For example, in a 10-page section on multilateral operations, Canada includes specifics on key principles in designing missions within which are specifications of what multilateral operations Canada would participate in; support and contributions to peacekeeping training for said missions; specifics on force deployments to NATO and the UN, including the number and kind of battle groups (infantry battalions, artillery, air squadrons, naval task groups, tactical squadrons, and so on), weaponry (how many ships and of what kind, and so on), and personnel (aircrews to serve NATO's Standing Naval Force). While Latin American White Books simply list components of their forces, Canada ties these components to specific missions and strategies.

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